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Dry Notes from Dry Lake

BY JOSEPH DIXON

D RY LAKE is tucked away among the mountain ridges about 2400 feet below the summit of San Gorgonio Peak, San Bernardino Co., California. This lake has an elevation of over 9000 feet, and at times it is a very pretty little stretch of water covering five or six acres. We found when we visited it on the twenty-first day of last June, that it contained considerable water which was due to last winter's heavy snowfall. Yet during certain previous years it has held very little or no water; hence the name.

There is a fringe of dead Murray pines some 50 yards in breadth bordering the lake. Back of this there is a dense forest of Murray pines, extending up the slope of the mountain side where the trees become smaller and smaller and more gnarled and stunted as they approach timber line; while in the background the snow-capped summit of San Gorgonio Peak stands like a sentinel of old, keeping watch over the little lake nestled among the mountain ridges below it.

Just north of the lake is a beautiful little cienega while on the slope above this are a few Jeffrey pines scattered over the mountain side which is covered with chinquapin thickets. As we were descending the mountain side above the lake Mr. Grinnell shot at a Sierra hermit thrush (*Hylocichla g. sequoiensis*), which flew up into a small grove of dense pines. The report of the gun flushed a gray flycatcher (*Empidonax canescens*) from a small pine tree. I secured the bird as she lit on an adjoining tree and soon located the nest which was placed about nine feet up in a slender pine. The nest was made of the inner bark of a kind of willow that grew nearby. This material being of a light color made the nest rather conspicuous as it contrasted with the dark foliage of the pine trees. The nest though bulky was neatly made and contained four light cream-colored eggs. The eggs were not spotted and incubation was far advanced.

We went on past the lake and made camp up a side canyon; then started out to explore the vicinity. I had just started when I heard a deep mellow drumming off in the woods ahead of me. Then suddenly the drumming became higher pitched and the vibrations more rapid. After a short interval I again heard the deep mellow roll. I sneaked up near a big dead pine tree from which the sound seemed to issue. Pretty soon a Cabanis woodpecker (*Dryobates v. hyloscopus*) hopped up on one of the big dead branches and, bracing himself, gave the branch several rapid pecks with his bill. This produced the deep mellow roll that I had heard at first. He then dropped down to a lower smaller limb and repeated the performance causing the high pitched roll. He then hopped up to the big branch then back to the smaller branch and drummed again. The various noises that he produced reminded me very much of some one playing on a xylophone, and, although I have heard many other woodpeckers drumming, this one was to my mind unique as he was able to handle several limbs at once, in good time.

An ashy kinglet (*Regulus calendula cineraceus*) sang from the top of one of the largest pines until sunset when the clear limpid notes of the Sierra hermit thrush floated down from the meadow above us. The song of the hermit thrush is, to my mind, the most exquisite of bird music. At early morning or late evening they could be heard from the mountain slope above and cautious approach revealed them perched on the top of some large pine tree which stood among deep snow drifts which covered the north slope of the mountain.

Soon after sunset the western night hawks (*Chordeiles v. henryi*) made their appearance, flying about uttering their rasping *pe-ark, pe-ark*, or pitching down

over the lake causing a deep booming sound which was plainly heard a long way through the calm cold air of evening.

A short time after we had gone to bed we heard an owl hooting over in the woods near the lake. The call notes were new to us but we failed to locate their source. About midnight I was awakened by Mr. Grinnell as he slipped out of bed. I watched him for several minutes as he stole stealthily about peering up into the pine trees. Then as a little owl came flitting over the campfire I recognized the cause of his nocturnal wanderings. The owl flew back and forth near the fire, perching for a moment now and then on the lower branches of a pine tree. Mr. Grinnell kept up with the bird, now advancing, now retreating, while his march was punctuated with smothered exclamations as his stocking feet came in contact with pine cones. Suddenly the sharp spiteful crack of the "aux" rang out; the owl circled over the bed and disappeared in the darkness. Nothing else disturbed our fitful slumbers until the golden rays of the sun reflected brightly from the snow covered summit of old Grayback.

Some weeks later at Bluff Lake we again heard an owl calling. The notes were exactly the same as those heard at Dry Lake. The bird seemed to be off about 300 yards on a ridge but we found that the notes were very deceptive, and that the bird was not so far away as it seemed to be. Mr. Grinnell finally located the bird in the top of a tall pine tree and a charge of number six shot brought it down. It was a flammulated screech owl (*Otus flammeola*).

Our provisions were running low, so after a very light breakfast, which consisted of two hardtacks, five dried prunes, five ginger snaps and a few sour beans for each of us, we set out to examine our mammal traps. As I was returning to camp a male Williamson sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*) flew by me and lit on the side of a Murray pine. I shot the bird. When I picked him up I saw that his bill was full of ants. I began to look for a nest as I felt sure that he was carrying the ants to his mate or their young. I looked up the tree and saw several holes. Then a faint squeaking came to my ears. The tree was alive but up about twenty feet were four holes drilled about eighteen inches apart. I found when I chopped the nest out that the wood where the holes were pecked was dead and partially rotten. The nest cavity was about ten inches deep and was occupied by three young birds which were still covered with natal down. In the bottom of the nest, partially covered with fine chips were two sterile eggs. The birds were very noisy; also hungry as they tried to swallow my finger every time it came too close to their bills. The female was near and seemed very much concerned. Her anxiety was perhaps increased by the loss of her mate so I fixed up the hole I had cut and descended. Although she had the responsibility and work of two thrown on her in rearing the young, she seemed equal to the occasion for when I visited the nest two weeks later the young had flown. Later in the day another nest was found similarly located containing four half fledged young.

Audubon warblers (*Dendroica auduboni*) flitted about among the trees carrying worms and insects to their mates or broods which were hidden away among the thick boughs of some pine tree. Just above the cienega in a thicket of chinquapin bushes we flushed a family of Stephens fox sparrows (*Passerella i. stephensi*). The young were barely able to fly but scattered in all directions on our approach.

The brilliant morning sunlight soon drove away the chilliness that had settled over the woods during the night, and brought forth the birds from their various resting places. Their lively twittering and call notes reminded us that we too must begin our day's work, so we packed our blankets and traps and threw them across our shoulders, picked up our guns, and started over the ridge towards the north where our base camp lay some 3000 feet below us.

Pasadena, California.